

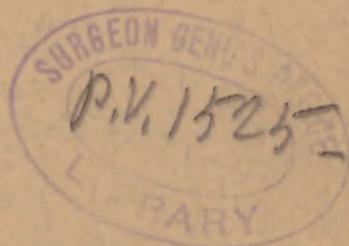
46 DOWN IN DIXIE

A SECOND BIRMINGHAM, ALA., LETTER

BY

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SIR : The letter which I recently sent you from Birmingham, and which appeared in your issue of July 5, 1890, has met with such a flattering reception, that I am tempted to write you a quasi-continuation of my observations in the New South. It is an indisputable advantage of mental photography that the supply of sensitive film-plates need not become exhausted, until the first serious symptoms of cerebrasthenia are noticed by the supplier. Even a large-sized Kodak holds but a limited amount of impressionable material. But a well-regulated Northern encephalon, on its virgin trip through the South, is almost all impressionable stuff. You just drop a nickel in the cerebral slot, as it were, and take out a brand new impression on anything that may have happened within the limitless horizon of the mind.

The Colored Problem Again.—It is, of course, not to be expected that these nickel-in-the-slot views can please everybody. Human nature is not made that way. It would kill variety, the very essence of life. But you step on my corns and I'll step on yours, has always been considered good Christian doctrine. I have been taken to task for solving the race problem, which is a question that was never intended to be solved at all. So say my critics, and critics always know. I am one of them myself.

Now, it must be painfully humiliating for the light comedian to have his audience provoked to tears of sad emotion, when his sole purpose was to make them lacry-mate with laughter. Yet such a fate will have to be my

sorry portion, if the *Birmingham Youth-Herald* and its journalistic me-too, the *New York Tribune*, are to be credited with the possible expression of unbiassed conviction. At any rate, these leading Administration sheets solemnly agree on the one vital point of violently denouncing my impertinent solution of the race problem. But they might as well stop fulminating. The problem is solved, and will remain so. The negro question is no longer a live political issue. The Force bill comes too late now. I cannot tell a lie, I did it with my little yellow dog.

For those interested in history I may say that Judge Fenner, of the Supreme Court of Louisiana, has just published a lengthy article on this self-same problem, in the June number of *Belford's Magazine*. Had this learned legal luminary known how speedily the question was to be finally disposed of, he probably would never have written the following : "The negro must, therefore, understand that the race problem is not a Federal question ; that it is a false and foreign issue in national politics ; that the Federal Government lacks the inherent power to deal with it ; that its interference provokes and creates evils which it is powerless to remedy ; and that, if the problem is to be peacefully solved at all, it can only be by the action and co-operation of the people, white and black, of the several States.

"Turning to these inevitable and exclusive factors in the solution of this mighty problem, we feel ourselves lifted into a different sphere of motive, of action, of responsibility. The meddlesome impertinence, the rash empiricism, the irresponsible tinkering, the petty and sordid considerations of party advantage, the arch insincerity which, at bottom, desires nothing so little as a peaceful solution and hails every outrage as fresh grist to the political mill, and all the kindred follies and frivolities which characterize the treatment of this question as an issue of national politics, pass into the limbo of utter insignificance and irrelevancy.

"To the whites and blacks of the South this question presents a different aspect. It looms before them as a gathering thunder-cloud, black with wrath and desolation, instinct with lightnings, whose fugitive bolts already

strike, now here, now there, solemn warnings of the consuming fires which, if that cloud bursts, will scorch and wither this fair land.

"It behooves us, brethren, white and black, to take counsel together, while there is yet time, to see what we can do to avert this peril and to solve this problem which God has given into our hands. Whither are we drifting? Toward a war of races. Not, perhaps, a war fought in the open field, with organized battalions; the forces are too unequal for that; but toward a settled and perpetual race-conflict, inspired by mutual hatred, suspicion, and distrust, with opposing forces mustered in every village and hamlet and household."

In conclusion the author of this powerful essay says that: "If the negro seeks a higher and a nobler destiny, Providence points it out to him with unerring finger. An undeveloped continent, the birthplace of his race, lies before him, peopled by millions of his brethren, who exist in the same state of ignorance and barbarism from which slavery extricated him. If he is capable of standing alone, of maintaining and of spreading the civilization which he has acquired, there is his true field, to which he is called by every sentiment of duty to his race and to its birthplace. I talk not of deportation, or of any sudden or rapid exodus stimulated by artificial aid or exhortation; but of a natural, gradual, voluntary movement, under the influence of high motive and of wise consideration, which will accomplish itself gradually, safely, and without shock, according to the laws which govern the shifting of population."

Now, with all due deference to Judge Fenner, I submit that his advice comes about as near to my yellow-pup solution as a black cat does to a white one, on a dark night. I almost feel convicted of plagiarism in having unwittingly put his legally-clad suggestion into plain English. But this is a medical journal and, therefore, let us play ball.

Southern Fever versus Typhoid Fever.—Fever is very prevalent in the South. There is much difference of opinion among medical men as to the true nature of the continued febrile affections that have their home there. After much study of this moot-question, after earnest

conversation with leading Southern practitioners, and after some slight personal experience, I have come to the conclusion that Southern fever, or fevers, ought to be re-studied and rewritten, in the light of modern research. What we want to know is the pathology of these conditions. What, if any, are the specific microbes belonging to them? Is the malarial organism pathognomonic of paludal poisoning? Does it occur only in true malaria? Is there a mixed infection from typhoid bacilli and malarial micro-organisms? These and kindred questions have suggested themselves to me, as they probably have to others. Why do not the Southern physicians bestir themselves to give reliable answers to them. We have had enough of mere clinical observation. We have had enough loose and hap-hazard society talk, representing the views of Dr. So-and-so, and the totally divergent views of his fellow-practitioner, Dr. This-and-that, from the same town. What good does it do for one man to get up and solemnly declare that all these cases are instances of typhoid fever, when an equally honest and accurate observer will rise immediately afterward and stake his reputation on the positive assertion, that they are without exception continued malarial fevers. Even in America we have happily outlived the era in medicine when the slightest value attaches to views so loosely expressed. We need accurate, scientific research, coupled with experimental and clinical observation, that will stand the test of ready confirmation by independent investigators. Anything short of this will be rightly considered mere verbiage or padding.

It is for this reason that I refrain from putting side by side, as was my original intention, two tables comprising groups of symptoms that were to serve as a means of differential diagnosis in cases of Southern fever. The one group contained the symptoms of typical typhoid fever, as ordinarily seen in the North, and the second, supplied by two busy practitioners of Birmingham, contained the symptoms alleged to belong to "Birmingham fever."

A Word of Warning Concerning Birmingham.—That the Southern fever of the city mentioned is more apt to be an atypical typhoid than a paludal fever, I am convinced of, for the simple reason that a severe epidemic of

true typhoid fever occurred there in 1881. At that time the place had a population of perhaps four thousand, and five hundred cases (at a low estimate) of typhoid fever were observed. (See *Transactions of the State Society of Alabama, 1881*.)

In every succeeding year since then, many "fever cases" have occurred. And there can be no doubt that endemic influences exist in Birmingham to perpetuate the fever. That malaria is also rife there, and may complicate a given case, does not in the least militate against the view that most of the "Birmingham fever" cases are really instances of true typhoid fever.

So long, therefore, as the sanitary conditions of Birmingham remain in their present state, it is an excellent place to stay away from. But if a Northerner must needs go there, let him not be unmindful of certain necessary precautions as to drinking-water, food, clothing, etc. I would also warn any Northerner about first going there in the summer months, the fall and winter months being less dangerous.

Conscientious practitioners there will agree with me, in strongly urging the immediate transportation to a climate or place free from "local influences," of any fever case that is at all suspicious, especially when it happens to affect the person of one not yet thoroughly acclimated.

A Visit to the Pratt Mines.—About seven miles out from Birmingham, by the Ensley City Dummy, you reach the largest coal mines in the South, the famous Pratt mines. The daily output from these mines is nearly five thousand tons, and many hundreds of laborers find steady employment there. Coal is mined in six slopes and two shafts. Shaft No. 1 and slope No. 2 are peculiar in being worked under the reprehensible system of convict labor, which still obtains in the State of Alabama. Most of the convicts are colored, and the offences for which they do hard labor are often of the petit larceny kind.

The unaccounted-for acquisition of property in the chicken and watermelon line, usually entitles the dis- coveree to mine coal for the Pratt people, for a very arbitrary period of time. The State treasury benefits thereby to the extent of about thirty-five cents per day, the sum paid by the mine owners for every working con-

vict. It is a beneficent system, which makes coal cheaper than it would otherwise be. But the colored people hate the very name of "Pratt Mines," which is to them the American synonym for Botany Bay.

The village of Pratt Mines is a straggling conglomeration of white cottages and black squatter huts. Doctors are plentiful even there. A constantly shifting population of about seven thousand is supposed to support twelve doctors. An intelligent-looking variety-store-keeper, when questioned how so many doctors managed to get a living out of so few people, said: "Well, Cap'n, I dunno haow thay do it, but thay do do it for a fack," which answer was probably strictly true.

The Prison Hospital of Pratt Mines.—This little hospital appeared to me a model institution of its kind. A neater, cleaner, more inviting infirmary I have rarely seen. The credit for this spick and span, new look of the hospital is due entirely to the vigilant care of the doctor in charge, who is himself a convict. It seems that this physician, who received me with the grave dignity and stately presence of an old-time courtier, once held a public office of trust. In a moment of alcoholic relaxation a petty embezzlement became his guilty misfortune. Five years penal servitude seems harsh punishment for a slight offence. But justice is too often a farce down in Dixie, at least for white crimes. Perhaps such lessons will produce salutary effects. It seemed a pity, though, that a gentleman of such evident culture, a physician of unusual learning, a man whom nature seemed to have intended for high stations, should spend his days in ministering to the wants of ailing negro convicts.

Birmingham's Chief Industries.—The Magic City is completely encircled by a mighty belt of furnaces, coke ovens, iron and steel plants, rolling mills, and factories of all conceivable kinds. Hundreds of tall chimneys "belch fire and rolling smoke" all night long, as well as in the day-time. The furnaces are compelled to do business twenty-four hours a day, seven days in the week, just like the leading saloons. Most of the latter (and there is quite a sprinkling of latters) are "open all day," their pan-nocturnal patency being a matter of course. As for the spirits conducive to healthful life and multifarious

activity, commend me to a Birmingham night following pay-day. It is the Saturday pay that makes a quiet Sabbath, though it fills more bed-rooms with big heads than church-pews with wide-asleep conformers. But towering far away and above the infant industries already mentioned, there rise before the awe-struck gaze two grasping monopolies. They are the totally-eclipsing chewing-gum trust and the consolidated patent-medicine syndicate. It is true, some able-bodied men do find employment in iron foundries, in factories, shops, and warehouses. But everybody, man, woman, child, and mother-in-law, is permanently engaged in the chewing-gum field of labor. Cotton was king in the South, years ago ; but he has abdicated, and the royal prerogatives have fallen on the graceful shoulders of Queen Gum. So it happens that any leisure moments that the loyal subjects of her Majesty of Spruce and Tolu are able to snatch from those arduous duties which may be called the stress of chew, are devoted to the hopeless consumption of patent medicine.

One of the most eminent Southern statisticians, a man who has devoted his entire life to the elucidation of the gum question, informs me that the last census contains a gross libel upon the fair fame of the sunny South, in placing the per capita daily mastication of gum as low as seventeen packages. He asserts that the corrupt person who compiled these figures must have been entirely out of his census, and should chews another calling. In 1890, he feels assured, the honest enumerator will vindicate the chewing capacity of the indigenous citizen by a truthful statement of the real facts. Nobody down here, with an iota of respect for himself or his surroundings, no person of chivalrous disposition, of dignity, patriotism, or positive religious convictions, was ever known to chew less than twenty-nine different varieties of gum, every waking day of his, her, or its life. In fact, I distinctly recall a professional sleeping beauty, who diligently masticated while Morpheus hugged her in close embrace. But Southern gum is good gum, that is true, and while testing its various virtues, I often felt impelled to wish for a speedy metempsychosis into the higher order of ruminantia. So, too, the propriety of lending proper

emphasis to a plain statement, by invoking "gum," no longer admits of any doubt in my mind.

As for patent medicines, they or their initials thrive on every fence, grow on all trees, luxuriate in undisputed possession of every nook and cranny which is not already filled out by a healthy real estate boom. If you want to study the astounding capability of combining in countless ways the innocent letters of our meagre alphabet, go to Birmingham, and study its surroundings.

The Beauties of Nature.—The S. S. S., the R. R. R., the W. W. C. (I can assure suspecting readers on good authority that the first W. does not stand for women's) the X. X. X.—these and untold other letters, presumably pregnant with deep significance, adorn the landscape in such fashion that poor nature is put to shame, and accordingly keeps her head hidden from sight. Thus no flower blossoms in Birmingham, no luscious vegetable puts forth tender buds of hope, the woodbine twineth not, neither does the cranberry cran. A sterile plain, heavy-laden with stifling dust; zephyrs on whose wings are wafted breezes that smut your face and cover you with a dismal film a mummy would take pride in; no song-birds to gossip in the sulphur-charged atmosphere; no tempting river suggestive of a coolness that the furnace-heated air can never hold—such are some of the natural advantages possessed by this subtropical town. Man has added to these blessings the ceaseless din of dummies, the rush and roar of trains, the steady screech of steam-whistles, the harsh clang of bells, the rattling of heavy carts over hard pavements—this to please his ear. The structures he has reared to favorably impress the sight, the smells he has established to pleasantly titillate his olfactories, the menus he has concocted to agreeably touch his palate—all these things, although pertaining chiefly to the grosser senses, he has already brought to a rare degree of perfection. And the future is still before this Birmingham. But mortal pen must pause on the threshold of the possible. What lies beyond is all "imagining," and bereft of the good sense that the reader has the right to demand of your correspondent.

EDMUND CHARLES WENDT, M.D.

WAVR CRST, FAR ROCKAWAY, N. Y., July, 1890.